



Quail Island Air Weapons Range Unexploded Ordnance (UXO) Hazard Reduction Project

Newsletter No. 11
Wednesday 17 July 2013

Update from the Project Manager

With the advent of the new financial year, I am pleased to report that the Department of Defence Unexploded Ordnance (UXO) Hazard Reduction project on Bare Sand Island is nearing completion. Up until the end of June this year, the Defence contractor, G-tek Australia Pty Ltd, recovered 23 high explosive-filled aircraft bombs varying in size between 120 and 1,000 pounds (56-450kg).

Almost all of the UXO items recovered this year were at depths of more than 1.5 metres and some from more than 4 metres. It has been necessary to bring an excavator on to Bare Sand Island in order to get to those depths. The machine removed sand to within 0.5 metres of each item, the 'depth to target' being continually monitored using a magnetic locator. The final half metre was then carefully removed by hand.

Department of Defence technicians successfully demolished all of these items during June.

However, the completion of hazard reduction activities on Bare Sand Island does not mean that the project is finished. Operations have resumed on Quail Island and current indications are that the task there may extend into 2015. For that reason, the Defence Practice Area exclusion zone of a circle of 5,500 metres from the centre of Quail Island (and which is advertised frequently in the NT Times newspaper) must remain in place. As previously advised, both Defence and its contractor will make every effort to accommodate persons and groups who have a need to visit the islands. It is essential that we know exactly who is inside the exclusion zone and where they are.

On that subject, I have had to recently write to all the local fishing charter companies to re-enforce this message. This year we have had a number of charter boats coming in to the exclusion zone without our prior knowledge and tying up on reefs to fish. One instance occurred in June on a day that explosive demolitions were scheduled on Bare Sand Island. Again, I would earnestly request that prior permission for such activities be gained from either the Defence project manager or the contractor. Contact details are provided elsewhere in this newsletter.

The project team continues to share Bare Sand Island with a sea turtle research group sponsored by Charles Darwin University. I was pleased to see the continued high level of cooperation, which has included our aircraft again transporting personnel and stores for the study group.



Going after a deep bomb – Bare Sand Island.



This 250 pound (112kg) high explosive aircraft bomb was just one of many recovered with mechanical assistance and hand excavation.

Photo: G-tek Australia Pty Ltd

Photo: G-tek Australia Pty Ltd

The Defence team has again drawn favourable comment from the research team for the part they have played during the study period.

In this issue is an interesting story by Betty Franklin about a B25 Mitchell bomber that crashed near Bare Sand Island in May 1944 with the loss of six lives. The Defence team has removed much of the wreckage found, but unfortunately was not able to locate any indicators that human remains may have been present.

I will shortly be relinquishing the position of Defence manager for this project and will be handing over to Brian Barkworth, a former British Army Royal Engineers officer, who has recently joined Department of Defence as Manager of the National UXO Office and who will shortly inherit management responsibilities for the Quail Island project. I would like to thank all concerned for making my task as project manager so easy and I am confident that Brian will similarly be able to see the task through to a successful conclusion.

One small island, one special story



A pair of No. 18 (NEI) Squadron Mitchells in flight over the Northern Territory.



One of the last 250 pound (112kg) aircraft bombs is explosively demolished on Bare Sand Island.



These flatback turtle hatchlings were found 'going the wrong way' after emerging from the nest. They were released in darkness to reduce daylight exposure to predatory birds.

"In the Bynoe Harbour area of Darwin there is a small group of islands often referred to as the Grose Islands Group. In this group are three small islands that were used for bombing practice by the RAAF and allied forces from 1910 right through to 1979."

There are many stories that remain untold from the war in the Top End when, with a devastating impact on its people on the 19 February 1942, Darwin was bombed by the same air force that three months earlier had attacked Pearl Harbour. With this attack described by one of the participants as "cracking an egg with a sledgehammer" the Second World War had landed on Australian soil.

Many are those heroes during that time, whose names we do not know, whose contribution to the safety of Australia and her people are uncalculated but priceless.

Within this significant period of history lies the little known story of the 18 Squadron Netherlands East Indies Air Force (NEIF) and of one particular crew; that of a B25D Mitchell Bomber number N5-176. I encountered their story back in 2010 whilst doing the long dreamed of volunteer week researching sea turtles on a little gold sand speck of an island named "Bare Sand Island". As the name implies, lying in beautiful Bynoe Harbour approximately 65km south west of Darwin in the "Top End", it is a sand island with one single tree that is home to its resident birdlife. Here wandering around this tiny speck during a break in research activity and enjoying the solitude and beauty, I noticed a large piece of metal partly buried above the high water mark. A few enquiries led to the realisation that this was the remains of an aircraft that had crashed near here in 1944. I was intrigued and later drawn into the very human story of the plane and her crew. This striated, water degraded, encrusted piece of metal was a small part of N5-176.



The mixed Dutch and Australian crew of Mitchell N5-131 stand in front of their aircraft at McDonald strip after a raid over the NEI. The name "Pulk", painted below the aircraft's cockpit refers to an 18 Squadron officer, "Pulk" Pender. Pender survived the war and died about 12 years ago.

in his statement on what had occurred on that day:

"On 30th May 1944, I was Captain of N.E.I. aircraft B25 N5-188 and took off for an operational training flight over Range "L" off Grose Island, together with three other aircraft, N5-171, N5-176 and N5-185. Sgt Crosbie (RAAF Air gunner) was crewed in N5-176.

When over Range "L" the aircraft formed pairs to make bombing runs, N5-176 being paired with N5-188 and carried out three bombing runs at mast height. On the fourth run, N5-176 came in to bomb at a slightly different course causing the port wing of the aircraft to be hit by a column of water caused by the explosion of the bomb released by N5-188.

I saw the port wing blown from N5-176, which turned on its back immediately and crashed into the water, disappearing completely. Although I circled the scene for a period of approximately 20 minutes the plane did not appear again.

All the crew members from the other three aircraft saw the wing of the N5-176 blown off, the aircraft then turning on its back and crashing into the shallows of the south west corner of a sandbank.

The aircraft was reported a total loss, and all crew members "missing believed killed". A Tiger Moth immediately searched the scene of the crash, but no survivors were found."

From the beginning, number 18 Squadron was one of the RAAF's most unusual units. It was raised at Fairbairn in the Australian Capital Territory on 4 April 1942. The commanding officer was a Dutch national, while the remainder of the squadron's complement was a mix of Netherlands East Indies (NEI) citizens and Australians. In December 1942, the long awaited move to an operational base in northern Australia began and the unit soon graduated from training flights to operational coastal patrols.

N5-176 was assigned to 18 Squadron in January 1944, but because of technical problems it was in repair until March 1944. After that it made missions to Penfoei, Lautem, Koepang, Tamimbar and Timor, striking Japanese targets.

On the fateful day of 30 May 1944 N5-176 was one of four aircraft to depart Batchelor airfield for skip bombing training exercises over the Grose Islands group.

The Dutch crew were Lt Visser, NEIAF (pilot), Lt. Bousche, NEIAF (Co-Pilot), Lt Fruin, NEIAF (Bombadier), Sgt Burghardt, NEIAF (Wireless Operator) and Lt Liem You Hien, NEIAF (Top Gunner).

One Australian Airman filled a role in that crew, the son of William and Agnes Crosbie. Twenty-two year old Sgt Jeffery David Crosbie (Service Number 436683) was from Midland Junction in Western Australia. He was the N5-176's tail gunner.

The crew and their very human tragedy was particularly brought home to me while doing my research when I read the following words of Captain P Van Buuren



'One bottle, per man, per week, per-haps.' RAAF ground crew of No. 18 NEI Squadron enjoy their weekly beer ration.



A recent photo of the engines of N5-176 at low tide off Bare Sand Island.

Today, Bare Sand Island revels in its name and is a bright golden jewel of sand where the white breasted sea eagle surveys the pock marked interior of the island from its single tree. Turtle hatchlings erupt in volcanic procession scrambling down to the nearest sea escape while adult female flatbacks continue their ages long climb to lay their eggs amongst the pristine sand dunes. Environmental Remediation work to remove the remnant ordnance and range debris from its period of life as a bombing range began in 2011 and is still being undertaken. The island, as well as being an important research site for sea turtle (particularly Australian Flatback turtles), is a natural harbour for yachties and fishing folk, a valuable ecological habitat and a traditional landing place of the Larrakia people of Darwin.

The Australian Defence Force (ADF) is in charge of this remediation project that will benefit all of the Indigenous, tourism and recreational interests as the island will offer a much safer environment for all, being brought about by the hazard reduction operation.

The ADF, particularly during this very important operation, paid close attention to the possibility of aircraft wreckage being found on the Island and while aircraft remnants were found, there were no indications of human remains. The Directorate of Coordination RAAF had stood ready

during this part of the operation to deploy a forensic examination team to Bare Sand Island in the event that indicators of remains were discovered. To date none have been.

For me the simple beauty of this tiny island will always be witness to that crew that died there so long before my birth, doing what was important to all people then and into our future. I believe they rest in peace there and hope perhaps their valiant spirits continue to guard its beauty and innocence for generations to come.

Betty Franklin

Darwin
2013

Project contact details

For more information regarding the hazard reduction project or to discuss entering the exclusion zone please contact:

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